Ministry of Agriculture

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

Log Number: 08-22-97
Week of May 26, 2008

VOLUNTEER SUPPORT KEEPS DISABLED FARMERS WORKING

A volunteer program administered by the Saskatchewan Abilities Council keeps farmers working after they have acquired a disability, disease or medical condition.

"Farmers with Disabilities" taps the resourcefulness and empathy of nearly 200 volunteer farmers who have had to make adjustments and accommodations to their own practices in order to continue agricultural operations.

Bob Elian, the program's provincial co-ordinator, is guided by the input of these volunteers, who have a solid understanding of the issues farmers face after a serious injury or illness.

A priority service of the program is visitation to farmers at the hospital. The visitation is often facilitated by members of the patient's health care team, who ask if they would like to be contacted by someone from the Farmers with Disabilities program.

From there, volunteers are assigned to visitations based on similarities in age, disability or geography with the farmer in the hospital. Follow-up visitations are often scheduled at the farmers' homes once they have been released from the hospital.

During this time, facing the future is the most significant barrier to overcome. "The farmers who have been through it before are a real blessing to anyone with a new disability," said Elian. "The volunteer answers a lot of questions that the newly disabled person often has on how do they continue farming and what changes will they have to make – those types of things."

A second important area identified by the volunteers is the program's focus on "assistive technology." That includes machinery modifications and changes around the farmyard.

Farmers with Disabilities has collected a database of information on assistive technology developed by volunteers and peers. Elian says the database, called "Changing Gear," contains information on commercially available items that the farmers have found useful in adapting to their disabilities. The collection is available in catalogue format, on CD and on the Saskatchewan Abilities Council website.

The most popular assistive technologies include alternative machinery controls that adapt hand controls to foot controls, or vice versa. Lifts are also important for getting up to operators' platforms. As farmers

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age, they sometimes experience arthritis and find it difficult to climb.

Although the farmer visitations and the Changing Gear database are cornerstones of the program's success, organizers really emphasize safety and prevention to avoid the need for such services. Elian says the volunteers serve as champions for safety. "They're like every other farmer, except they've been caught and injured," he said.

"The most important thing in the farmers' minds is that safety is number one. Whether they're promoting it to children or adults, they want to get the message across that safety is an attitude that they have to practice every day. They also want people to use the latest methods in safety."

To help spread the word, the Saskatchewan Abilities Council participates in the "Operation Farm Safety" initiative with Saskferco and the Saskatchewan Ministry of Advanced Education, Employment and Labour. The council contributes by assigning volunteers to deliver safety presentations in schools, which include an age-appropriate farm safety video and a discussion in which the volunteer shares his or her personal story. Students are sent home with an information package of safety reminders for review with their parents.

Operation Farm Safety is a single component of Farmers with Disabilities' communication strategy. Other aspects include the volunteers' active role in farm safety days, workshops and tradeshows. "Handifarmer," a newsletter produced by the program three times a year, contains motivating messages and success stories, as well as information on assistive technologies and upcoming events. Media relations and literature distribution also help get the word out.

The program likewise serves as a broker of print materials from the Saskatchewan Safety Council and the Ministry of Advanced Education, Employment and Labour in order to provide audiences the most complete information possible.

Farmers with Disabilities demonstrates the resourcefulness of Saskatchewan's agricultural producers. As proof, one needs look no further than Changing Gear, which contains a broad variety of innovations.

The program also exemplifies the generosity of farmers and their willingness to help one another. Elian has never had difficulty selecting an appropriate volunteer willing and able to relate to any farmer in the hospital.

Hopefully, because of the volunteers' work in safety education, fewer visits to the hospital will be required in the future.

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For more information, contact:

Bob Elian, Farmers with Disabilities Co-ordinator
Saskatchewan Abilities Council
Phone: (306) 374-4448
E-mail: farmerswithdisabilities@abilitiescouncil.sk.ca
Website: http://www.abilitiescouncil.sk.ca/